

Sunday 10th January – Baptism of Christ

Sermon by Anne-Marie Renshaw

Today we celebrate the baptism of Jesus by John at the River Jordan. It is an important moment and one that will mark the beginning of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was around thirty years old at this time. We don't really know what he had been doing. He is generally assumed to have been working as a carpenter, the trade of his foster-father, Joseph, and caring for his mother and younger siblings. It seems likely Mary was widowed by this time as she is mentioned several times in the gospels, but there is no further mention of Joseph. Jesus doesn't appear to have married or had children, which would have been unusual for a firstborn son, but not impossible. A son with a widowed mother and younger siblings to provide for might well choose to wait a few years to allow them to become established and financially independent before starting a family of his own.

It is the baptism that starts off Jesus' ministry. You will remember that John had been calling on people to turn back to God and be baptised as a sign of repentance for their sins. Matthew tells us that John was reluctant to baptise Jesus, suggesting that Jesus ought to be the one baptising him. Surely Jesus of all people did not need to turn back to God or repent of sin. Yet it is the moment of baptism that God chooses to use to confirm Jesus' identity. As Jesus comes up out of the water, he sees the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending on him in the form of a dove. The voice of God is heard: "You are My Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

In this moment the Trinity comes together in all three persons: the physical person of Jesus, the power of the Spirit and the voice of the Father. We see how the three persons of the Trinity connect in Jesus as he is filled with the Spirit's power and the relationship of love between him and the Father is affirmed. Theologians argue over whether or not Jesus had the power of God at his disposal before his baptism or indeed to what extent he knew who he was and understood all that it meant. There are legends, not in the four biblical gospels, of Jesus as a child making birds out of clay and bringing them to life. There is a rather more dubious story too about him cursing a local bully, who then drops down dead. Jesus later brings him back to life, but I still struggle to see that as something Jesus would actually have done. The only event recorded in the Bible of Jesus' childhood is the occasion when Mary and Joseph lose him in Jerusalem and find him three days later discussing theology with the teachers in the temple. Jesus refers to the temple as his Father's house, but any good Jew might have referred to God as Father.

Jesus' response to what happens at his baptism will be to go out into the wilderness, where he will spend forty days fasting, praying and facing temptation. The temptations focus primarily on testing out his identity as God's Son and on misusing the power he has been given. That focus makes me wonder if he really didn't know just who he was until the moment he felt the power of the Spirit and heard the voice of the Father. It would make absolute sense for him then to go away by himself and wrestle with all that this new realisation of his identity means, including fighting the temptation to abuse the power that is now his.

There is no doubt that Jesus has power. Notice what John says of him: that he is one who is "more powerful than I". We see Jesus' power at work in the miracles. We see his power to bring healing and reverse the damage done to people's minds and bodies by physical disease and mental trauma. We see his power over the natural world in the calming of the storm and the changing of water into wine. We see his power over death in the three occasions on which he raises someone from the dead: Lazarus, Jairus' daughter and the son of the widow at Nain. We see his power over the spiritual forces of evil as he casts out the demons who have subjected others to their control and, indeed, as he overcomes the temptations of the devil.

In our Christmas readings, St John reminded us that Jesus is the Word of God, present at the creation of the world. The power Jesus has is the same power that brought creation into being. When you think of it that way, Jesus has an awful lot of power at his command, which is why it was so important for him to be able to withstand the temptation to use his power wrongly. I wonder how hard it was for Jesus not to strike down the Pharisees and the religious hypocrites? I wonder how much he had to work to control his temper when he went into the temple and saw that they had turned it into a den of thieves? Jesus is able to limit his power and refuse to use it for harm precisely because he has already resisted the temptation to turn stones into bread, to worship the devil or to throw himself down from the temple.

Jesus chooses to exercise his power in a very different way. The power Jesus embodies is the power to act with love and mercy. He has compassion on the wounded people he meets. He sees the grief of Jairus and his wife. He weeps with Mary and Martha at Lazarus' tomb. He is angry at the corruption and oppression he sees being perpetrated in the name of God. He uses his power to lift heavy burdens of guilt and shame, to remove people's pain, to restore their ability to function as members of the community. He does not use his power to get himself down from the cross, even though others taunt him to do so, because he knows God is going to demonstrate his power by raising him

from the dead just as he raised Lazarus. Power is not put to use to serve his own ends, but to show God's love and mercy to the people who cross his path.

This is not how human beings typically use power. We have witnessed this week what happens when power is misused, when it is directed towards what will benefit the individual rather than the many, when power is coloured by entitlement and fear, as Bishop Nick Baines put it in his Thought for the Day on Radio 4 on Thursday morning. I spent Wednesday evening watching the news on my television in disbelief as a serving President of the United States of America, a man who has sworn to defend America, encouraged a crowd of angry people to march towards the Capitol, the seat of law and order, and show strength rather than weakness. I could not believe what I was hearing as he told them he loved them, that they were "very special", that he understood their pain, as the men and women responsible for upholding the law barricaded themselves into their offices and cowered under their desks in fear for their lives. In a presidency that has been characterised by inflammatory speech and personal ego, it was clear that power was being used to assert the desire of one man to stay in office against the will of the majority of the electorate and at whatever the cost. I, for one, am grateful to the people who sat the President down on Thursday night and convinced him that he had to concede and allow for the peaceful transition of power.

Power is of itself neither good nor bad. It is often said that power corrupts, but it does not have to. Power can be used to control, to shame, to wound, to oppress, but it does not have to be this way. Jesus shows us that power can also be used to liberate, to bless, to heal, to redeem. Filled with the Spirit's creative power, Jesus brings light, life and hope into the situations he enters. Christians have continued to do this in his name, using the power available to them to campaign for justice, to meet the needs of the poor, to comfort those in distress. Christians have not always got this right. The church too has given in to the temptation to use its power to control and diminish others. But nowhere in the gospels do we see Jesus do this. Jesus' power is the power that separates light from darkness, the power that breathes life into creation, the power that brings resurrection and new life. This is what Jesus meant when he told Martha that he was the resurrection and the life. Jesus' power calls us out of darkness, like Lazarus out of the tomb. It heals the deepest wounds that we carry within us, as it does for the woman who touches the hem of Jesus' cloak. It restores our dignity as human beings made in the image of God, as it does for the man whose sins have weighed him down so much that he is quite literally paralysed.

We all know what power in the wrong hands can do. Jesus challenges us to look again at what power is and what it is for. He has come not to do his own will, but to do the will of his Father: to use the power of God in acts of love and mercy, to renew the image of God in fallen women and men and to open the way that leads to everlasting life. Amen.